

**Remarks of
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to the
PENNSYLVANIA MOTOR TRUCK ASSOCIATION
77TH ANNUAL MANAGEMENT CONFERENCE
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Introduction

I want to thank you for inviting me to be here today. Today I'd like to talk about what the Federal government is doing to improve highway safety, and issues that impact you in particular in the motor carrier industry.

Safety Goal

Safety is at the very HEART of what we do at the U.S. Department of Transportation (DOT) and Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration (FMCSA). DOT has set an aggressive goal of decreasing fatalities on our nation's highways. We are committed to reducing the fatality rate by 41 percent from 1996 to 2008.

We are encouraged that the fatality rate dropped last year and alcohol-related crashes are down from 2003. Still, 42,800 people died on the nation's highways in 2004, up slightly from 2003, according to preliminary projections. And, nearly 5,000 of those deaths involved commercial vehicles. We know that it's particularly challenging for motor carriers to bring down the fatality rate, because the truck miles traveled are increasing faster than vehicle miles.

Traffic crashes also put an estimated \$230 billion strain on our economy each year. This clearly contributes to the bigger picture of how transportation safety impacts the nation's economic growth.

Trucking In Pennsylvania

You all know first-hand the impact that trucking has on the economy. Trucking is important to Pennsylvania. The State has two of the Top 50 U.S. Freight Gateways – the Port of Philadelphia and Philadelphia International Airport. They had nearly \$20 billion of trade in 2003.

All this business results in more jobs locally across transportation modes, including trucking. Trucking is a big employer in Pennsylvania. In the State, one out of every 11 workers is employed in trucking occupations. In fact, trucking is the fourth largest employer in Pennsylvania.

Medical Issues

With so many truckers on the road, we want to make sure that these drivers are qualified in every way to safely operate a commercial motor vehicle (CMV). Safety requires that we consider drivers' fitness to operate CMVs.

Our Agency has a growing focus on medical issues that pertain to driver fitness. And drivers' medical certification is important to motor carriers and the law enforcement community.

We want to be sure that drivers are carrying proper, legal medical cards, issued by examiners who fully understand Federal requirements. Currently, the system is vulnerable to abuse on several levels. So FMCSA has initiatives underway to improve the certification of drivers and the documentation to back it up. Congress has been very supportive of these efforts.

One initiative would enable us to require medical practitioners to be trained and ensure they are properly qualified to examine truckers for their medical cards. Their names would be included in a National Registry of Certified Medical Examiners, so carriers and drivers would be able to locate certified examiners close to them. Pending Congressional approval in the reauthorization bill, this would take effect in 2007.

Earlier this week our Agency announced a public meeting, to be held June 22 in Arlington, Virginia, about the National Registry of Certified Medical Examiners.

The next initiative would ultimately do away with the medical card, replacing it with electronic records that can be accessed easily by law enforcement personnel, even at roadside inspections.

Our proposal is to merge truck drivers' medical information with the commercial driver's license data system. This is already being done in two States — Indiana and Arizona. We will introduce rulemaking in 2006 as the first step toward creating this program nationwide.

Last, FMCSA is creating a Medical Review Board. The board would be made up of five medical experts who would advise FMCSA on standards and long-term planning for our medical program. We are currently reviewing candidates, and we expect to have this panel begin work on various issues this fall. This will help us move forward more efficiently on other medical initiatives.

CDL Program Grants

Healthy drivers need to be skilled drivers, too, and our Commercial Drivers License (CDL) program helps States license qualified CMV drivers within Federal regulations. Our Agency wants to help States get drivers on the road and stay on the road safely, and our CDL grants are essential for the States to enforce CMV safety.

Pennsylvania, like other states, must comply with Federal rules to make sure that it gets all the CDL grant funds that it can. States have until September 30, 2005, to comply with

provisions of a rule requiring a number of technical changes to your CDL enforcement efforts. The rule is based on a Congressional mandate to FMCSA. The requirements involve record checks on drivers, disqualifying offenses, masking of convictions, and inclusion of violations committed in a non-commercial vehicle, to name a few.

FMCSA earlier this year sent letters to 42 State Governors reminding them of the pending deadline for these requirements. After September 30, 2006, any State not in compliance with this rule will lose 5 percent of its Federal-aid highway funds for the first year. Non-compliant States in subsequent years will lose 10 percent of Federal funds.

PennDOT has notified FMCSA that they are trying to meet this deadline, but will likely miss it. In fact, PennDOT says that, realistically, some changes won't be completed until January 2006. Pennsylvania had planned to change its outdated system, and is using that opportunity to incorporate our requirements.

Pennsylvania is issuing an emergency contract to make sure the requirements are incorporated as soon as possible. But again, it probably won't make the September 2005 deadline. While this means that your State will likely be non-compliant, the good news is that it expects to have the changes implemented long before the September 2006 deadline. THAT's when the reduction in Federal funds would actually kick in.

This could impact motor carriers. Carriers can play an important role by urging PennDOT to keep focused on CDL program improvement. A recent news article in the *Pittsburg Post Gazette* brought this matter to public light. It's important that everyone stay focused on the goal: to make sure that Pennsylvania meets the deadline to comply so that the state doesn't lose out.

As your own PMTA president Jim Runk has said, the new FMCSA regulations should improve overall highway safety and help responsible trucking firms to hire responsible people with safe-driving records. So it's important that we see this issue through to completion.

Driver Information Systems

Driving records are important, as research on CMV related crashes has often pointed toward driver-related factors. And yet there is no central collection of commercial driver safety performance and compliance data.

FMCSA safety research has shown that truck and bus drivers with past convictions, and the companies that hire them, are at a significantly higher risk for future commercial vehicle crashes.

Because some drivers don't report violations to their employers, a number of States have instituted employer notification service (ENS) programs. These programs send updates on a driver's record to the employing motor carriers. The updates indicate traffic violation convictions, license suspensions, revocations, cancellations, disqualifications, and other relevant data.

We believe these programs are extremely valuable, since FMCSA is a data-driven agency. We're currently conducting pilot tests on a national ENS program to see what opportunities and benefits it may offer to enforcement agencies and motor carriers.

Such a program may help identify high-risk drivers and increase motor carrier safety because carriers could make more informed hiring decisions. Our Agency is committed to helping carriers find out more about drivers because we know that you share our commitment to safety.

Regulatory Evaluation

As we look at what MORE we could do, we continue to work on other important issues already on our plate. One of these is looking at our existing and potential regulations to make sure that they are effective and consistent.

As a fairly new Agency within the DOT, FMCSA started out with a large number of uncompleted regulatory projects, which Congress directed us to address. We have made very good progress in this area, reducing our regulatory backlog by more than 40 percent over the last two years. We are working hard every day to reduce this further.

For example, while we consider new regulations, we also review what we already have in place to see if any adjustments or updates are necessary. To complement this effort, we are working on two new initiatives.

First, FMCSA is planning for a new Quality Assurance program to check to make sure our policies and procedures are effective and efficient, and are applied consistently. The goal is to ensure that our regulations are applied in the same way no matter where.

And of course, since our key mission is safety, we are also planning a Regulatory Evaluation program to review our existing regulations and ensure that they are having the intended safety impact.

Safety Belts

Finally, I'd like to bring you up to date on one of the DOT's highest safety priorities — safety belts. The Bush Administration is proud that we have raised the national safety belt usage rate to 80 percent — the highest level ever. This is estimated to save more than 15,000 lives and prevent \$50 billion in economic costs every year.

However, a recent study by FMCSA showed that only 48 percent of truck and bus drivers buckle up. We want to make sure that drivers complete their trips safely every day, in every place, so we are asking them to buckle up and help save lives on our Nation's highways.

Close

I want to thank you again for the opportunity to be here today.

